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FROM MONO TO MULTI: MULTICULTURALISM & MULTILINGUALISM IN MUSEUMS

Guest Editors' introduction:

Museums are educational institutions that support the understanding of one's heritage and create dialogue and reflection. As one commentator puts it, "Museums around the world hold some of the most valuable artifacts in existence" (Mia 2016). However, these artifacts are predominantly Western, with Eurocentric values attached to them. One could argue that, with such a high value placed on Western heritage, museums reinforce a primarily white visitor demographic. Moving forward, museums have to acclimate to the nonhomogeneous population around them. By so doing, the multiple barriers diverse audiences feel when visiting and feeling welcomed in a museum can be overcome, creating safe spaces for visitors to have rewarding experiences.

Keywords:

museum studies ♦ diversity ♦ audience engagement

With the demographics in the United States continually changing, it is important that museums adapt to the needs of their communities in order to have a better relationship with their audiences. "As public institutions of learning and engagement, museums must garner the attention and respect of the public to remain active and relevant to the community" (Association of Science-Technology Centers: 3). Doing so requires museums to remain human-focused

places, where anyone can see their experiences reflected and can find relevance in the content and the way the museum is presenting it.

As Assistant Curator of Community Engagement at the Tucson Museum of Art, I have witnessed too many community members feel uncomfortable or never visiting the museum because it is not their “place.” They feel they do not belong in museums, “strolling confidently into imposing architectures filled with works of accomplished art may appear to entail a particular risk. Judge by the makeup of their collection, staffs, supporters and by some of their methodologies; many art museums are the predominantly ‘white space’” (English 2015). TMA’s Community Engagement department aims to strengthen the role of the museum as a civic partner and community anchor through opportunities that connect diverse audiences with the museum. Our objective is to welcome people into the museum and find ways to help them connect with our space and collection in a more personal level.

To achieve this goal, we have developed nontraditional programming to better serve our community. Nontraditional programming is defined as fostering and maintaining partnership with local communities, hosting exhibition related events, and reaching out to low socioeconomic community. Non-traditional programming initiatives began at TMA as part of Network Connections aiming to “make meaningful connections between art and the intellectual and emotional world of our visitors and program participants” (Tucson Museum of Art 2017). The initiative was designed to bestow services for immigrants and refugees, strengthening the museum’s role as civic partner (Tucson Museum of Art 2017). Network Connections initiated the conversation of TMA needing to adapt to the community.

By developing strategic partnerships with local providers, we have been able to advance our *Free First Thursday* to be more culturally accessible, which brings in around 500-800 people in a three-hour period. Survey data we gathered reveal not only that our overall visitor volume increased by 75.4%, but also that the visitor population grew more diverse throughout the year due to our strategic partnerships. The partnerships and programming initiatives act as a catalyst, empowering and advancing the work of the museum (National Museum of African American History and Culture 2017), and collaborating with local organizations allows museums to cultivate new experiences for visitors.

We have seen a boost in the Hispanic community participation when we partnered with mariachi or ballet *folkórico* groups. The African American community supported the capoeira dancers who came to perform in the museum. TMA has also facilitated English, Spanish, and

Arabic conversations encouraging different audiences to participate in our events in an attempt to engage as many languages and cultures as possible.

By remaining a monolingual museum we placed ourselves and our community at a disadvantage. The knowledge of other languages and cultures is essential for education and skills (Creese & Blackledge 2014). U.S. museums are expecting its visitors to be bilingual, to know their native language plus English, but how are they compromising with the visitors' own languages? Lisa Abia-Smith, Director of Education at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, stated that “a museum needs to be responsive to its audience and align its programs to the audience's needs, rather than sit in a conference room and hypothesize about what the visitor needs” (Levere 2015). Knowing the museum's community wants and needs can help achieve this goal.

TMA has improved its outreach to the Hispanic community in the past year by working to create a bilingual museum. Systemic changes have included implementing gallery actives, exhibition guides, labels, and tours to meet the language demands of our adapting to the changes in our community, we have noticed a difference in spoken languages in the museum. The non-English speaking population in Tucson is not homogeneous, in the U.S., Hispanic and Latino audience embodies many different countries of origin (National Informal STEM Education Network 2013). Tucson's community speaks more than one language, 31.25% of the population speaks a language that is not English (Statistical Atlas).

The inclusion of multiple languages in the museum have instigated a more diverse community. As an art educator, I have prepared programming both in Spanish and English. When facilitating programming in Spanish, I have seen people feel more comfortable in the space. An English as a Second Language class opted to have a Spanish language tour because they wanted to fully enjoy their visit at the museum. People are intimidated by art and by museums in general; imagine the complication of having to think in a language that is not yours. Having programs in one's native language is important because it relieve the pressure or the embarrassment of misinterpretation. *Si yo hablo y no me entiendes, ¿cómo te sientes?* For a non-Spanish speaker, the last sentence was probably confusing or hard to understand, and that's how a lot of people are made to feel every day. Native-language programing benefits the participants in general, participants “are happier and more successful when they are taught in their own language” (Bradley 2017), they will also be engage and willing to participate in the activity. Monolingual institutions are no longer an option; they need to be fluent in the various languages of their

community. Having a multilingual space is a way of telling the visitors that we welcome and value them.

Free First Thursday has made us aware that the right partnership leads to a diverse crowd. Planning strategically who you are reaching out to and want to reach out leads bring people you would not reach out on your own. Also, providing additional languages at events welcomes new audiences with open arms. As we move forward, TMA is trying to reach out to others by following four essential values museums must support: diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion. These ideologies are not only the foundation of ethical and moral museum work, but they indicate how the field can remain relevant in today's climate (American Alliance of Museums 2018: 4). According to a case study done by the Association of Art Museums Directors, an issue concerning diversity is the lack of representation within the museum's professional roles (Association of Art Museum Directors 2018); museums must adjust hiring practices internally to mirror their community or their goal. Language is a barrier with which many people struggle. As we see an upsurge in immigrant populations, the museum should be as accessible as possible both physically and mentally. Having a staff linguistically prepared for its community can support this accessibility. Achieving measures of equity within the museum's visitors is crucial. "If museums and similar institutions are valuable resources for our societies, telling important stories through objects, programs, exhibits and so on, then those stories reflect how we see ourselves, how we construct knowledge, power and relevance" (The Inclusion 2015). The main goal of the museum is to fairly present or represent the stories of all its visitors. Lastly, it is vital that we, museums, practice inclusiveness. Seeing how museum programs or exhibitions change the lives of individuals, museums must educate the community as well as preserve community traditions, inspiring pride of origin (Museums Change Lives 2017). Museum visitors have the option to go where they have a rewarding experience and they make choices based on what places have to offer. Therefore museums have to evolve to be relevant in today's world.

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Denisse Brito obtained her BFA from the Division of Art and Visual Culture Education with an emphasis in Community and Museums from the University of Arizona in 2014. In 2017, she received her MA from the University of Leicester, England in Museum Studies. Denisse has a wide range of experience teaching individuals of different age and nationalities. She has been teaching in a museum setting for 5 years. Currently, she works at the Tucson Museum of Art as the Assistant of Community Engagement.